



**GLOBAL  
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# WHOSE CRIME IS IT ANYWAY?

Organized crime and international  
stabilization efforts in Mali

**MENAKA**  
Association des Elèves Etudiants Ressortissants de Ménaka  
**A E E R M**  
UNION - TRAVAIL - DEVELOPPEMENT



Peter Tinti

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Tinti is a senior research fellow at the GI-TOC. As part of his work for the GI-TOC, he has written and contributed to a number of reports on organized crime in the Sahel and Latin America, as well as migrant smuggling networks in Africa, Asia and Europe. In addition to this work, his writing, reporting and analysis has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, *World Politics Review*, *The Atlantic* and *Vice*, among other outlets.

He is the co-author, with Tuesday Reitano, of *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour* (Hurst, 2016) and is a lecturer at the Committee on International Relations, University of Chicago.

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Cartography: Liezel Bohdanowicz

Please direct inquiries to:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland

[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

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## SUMMARY

Since 2013, the Republic of Mali has become a focal point of international efforts to stabilize the Sahel region through a mix of direct military intervention, security assistance, development aid and humanitarian support. A coup on 18 August 2020, and a subsequent consolidation of power by the ruling junta on 24 May 2021, combined with ongoing insecurity throughout the country’s centre and north, have prompted various international actors to reconsider their stabilization efforts in Mali. While mandates from international coalitions aim to restore stability, governance and security to the country, a misinterpretation of the relationship between violent extremism and organized crime has led to an emphasis on technical, militarized approaches that do not adequately consider consequential dynamics on the ground. This paper explains the risks of this approach for undermining stabilization efforts across the region and provides recommendations for: focusing analysis and policy on informal and criminal economies, rather than violent extremism; and adopting more development-focused interventions that better support Malian communities.

### Key points

- Current international mandates and approaches to promoting stabilization in Mali mistakenly view organized crime and terror activities as being overtly linked, and illicit economies as being discrete activities controlled by discernible organized crime groups. Many illicit markets are, in fact, a part of long-existing informal economies and fuelled by communities who are seeking security, protection and economic opportunities within a highly volatile security environment.
- Since 2013, there has been an increase in arms trafficking, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling and extractive rents from artisanal gold mining, although not all criminal activity is inherently destabilizing.
- Political corruption enables the illicit economy in multiple ways: politicians embedded in organized crime activities, law enforcement and military members supplying weapons to the arms trade, failure to enforce law and order, and provide security, and coordination with armed groups.
- International military interventions have inevitably run into the messy politics of local armed groups, corrupt elites and inter-community tensions, leading to competing priorities and misaligned incentives. Interventions that do not accurately identify and assess the relationships between the various state and non-state actors in Mali, and between armed groups, jihadists and communities, will not be able to develop effective stabilization approaches in the region.
- Militarized and law-enforcement approaches to engaging organized crime should shift toward more development-oriented solutions that will enable communities to mitigate the negative impact of criminal agendas.
- Future mandates and programming should be designed to address the needs of local communities by allowing them to take the lead on developing responses to organized crime and criminal markets.

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
ISGS	Islamic State in the Great Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
SONATAM	Société Nationale des Tabacs et Allumettes du Mali



## INTRODUCTION: STABILIZING THE SAHEL

▲  
Malian soldiers gather in the capital, Bamako, August 2020.  
© Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Since 2013, the Republic of Mali has become a focal point of international efforts to stabilize the Sahel region through a mix of direct military intervention, security assistance, development aid and humanitarian support. This engagement has been challenged and shaped by political events within Mali, including a coup on 18 August 2020, and a subsequent removal of the then acting president and prime minister by the ruling junta on 24 May 2021. Since then, a nominally civilian transitional government, led by a ruling military junta, has consolidated power in the capital city of Bamako and proposed a five-year transition to civilian rule.<sup>1</sup>

This new phase of Malian politics comes at a time when Mali's international partners are reconsidering the nature of their stabilization strategies in the Sahel region. This is underlined by the restructuring of France's counterterrorism initiative, Opération Barkhane, which has been deploying 5 000 French military members to lead measures against Islamist insurgent groups since 2014.<sup>2</sup> As certain segments of the international community seek to isolate members of the ruling junta with sanctions,<sup>3</sup> Russia has entered the security arena through more salient security cooperation with the government, as well as by sending troops to Mali<sup>4</sup> amid speculation that private security contractors may also be deployed to Mali.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together, these developments represent the end of a specific era of international engagement with Mali, one that was guided by the belief that a combination of international counterterrorism operations, development funding and the process of elections would be sufficient to address Mali's overlapping security, political and social crises.

*The international community increasingly perceives organized crime as a strategic threat to stabilization efforts.*

One component of the complex situation in Mali that has come to the fore is the criminal economies and actors that are engaged in organized crime in the country. The international community increasingly perceives organized crime as a strategic threat to stabilization efforts, as evidenced by the mandate for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA),<sup>6</sup> as well as that of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which includes combating organized crime as a focus area.<sup>7</sup>

This underscores a trend seen since the early 2000s, in which the UN system and the international community have approached criminal actors not just as threats to peacekeeping missions, but to international peace and security more broadly.<sup>8</sup> The case of Mali, however, highlights how this perspective has not translated into a consolidated approach for peacekeeping operations and external security actors to engage criminal networks on the ground.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to combating organized crime in complex security environments such as Mali, conceptual frameworks have far outstripped their implementation.

Incorporating organized crime as a targeted component of peacekeeping mandates is part of a broader international trend in which some forms of organized crime, such as arms trafficking and drug trafficking, are increasingly linked with terrorism and violent extremism. Yet, these associations are often oversimplified and not necessarily conducive to developing realistic approaches to mitigating the impacts of organized crime in contexts like Mali.<sup>10</sup>

## **A crime–terror nexus?**

When MINUSMA was first authorized in 2013, the UN Security Council acknowledged the ‘serious threats posed by transnational organized crime in the Sahel region, and its increasing links, in some cases, with terrorism’.<sup>11</sup> Later, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2295 (2016), which authorized MINUSMA to adopt a more ‘proactive and robust posture’ when protecting civilians against asymmetric threats. The resolution also authorized the combating of terrorist groups and limiting the ‘proliferation of all arms and transnational organized crime and other illicit activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling of migrants and human trafficking’.<sup>12</sup>

In 2017, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2374 (2017), establishing a Panel of Experts to identify and impose sanctions on actors violating or obstructing the peace process, including those involved in ‘organized crime’. This resolution flags specific organized criminal activities of concern: production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and their precursors originating in or transiting Mali; trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants; smuggling and trafficking of arms; and trafficking in cultural property.<sup>13</sup> This mandate was most recently renewed in August 2021.<sup>14</sup>

The G5 Sahel Joint Force mandate explicitly links efforts to combat terrorism together with transnational organized crime, highlighting the increasing links between terrorism and arms trafficking, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons.<sup>15</sup> What is striking about the MINUSMA and G5 Sahel Joint Force mandates is that both frame their engagement principles by acknowledging overt linkages between organized crime and terrorism. In Mali, incorporating the transnational



**FIGURE 1** International peacekeeping, counterterrorism and security programmes in the G5 Sahel countries.

SOURCE: Centre for European Reform

organized crime threat into these peacekeeping mandates has largely translated into partnerships and training initiatives that emphasize bolstering the investigative capacity of local law enforcement and strengthening the judicial system, so that cases can be prosecuted.<sup>16</sup>

This paper situates transnational organized crime enterprises and economies in the context of ongoing instability in Mali. It argues that while international peacekeeping and counterterrorism missions in Mali operate in environments with varying degrees of organized criminal activity, the existing mandates are misguided in the way they link these elements. By implying that there is an easily discernible crime–terror nexus, these mandates risk mischaracterizing the nature of organized crime in Mali. As a result, these mandates may actually undermine stabilization efforts by misinterpreting certain types of illicit and informal markets as discrete forms of organized criminal activity, and miscalculating how communities interact with criminal markets.

These conceptual shortcomings do not mean that MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel Joint Force or other international actors operating in Mali should not consider organized crime within their approaches. But they do highlight the need for clear-eyed assessments of how different types of organized criminal activity fit within the broader political, economic and security contexts.



A French soldier watches over the Takuba Task Force's military base in Ménaka, Mali, December 2021.

© Thomas Coex/AFP via Getty Images

The situation is further complicated by the emergent 'security traffic jam' in Mali, within which multi-stakeholder initiatives such as MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel Joint Force take place in parallel to and at times in partnership with other international missions such as Opération Barkhane and the European-led Takuba Task Force, among others. These stakeholders may have different perceptions of transnational organized crime and the ways in which it impacts their strategic priorities in the region, which can translate into different or even competing tactics in terms of which criminal actors and markets to target. Stakeholder priorities, both international and domestic, also change as allegiances between local, national, regional and international actors shift.

Mali is undergoing a period of extreme insecurity and political uncertainty, which creates a challenge not only for properly defining and situating organized crime, but also developing international mandates that adequately account for it. Yet this context also presents an opportunity for the international community to envision and advocate for new approaches to combating organized crime and criminal governance that are not overly influenced by counterterrorism agendas.





## ORGANIZED CRIME TAKES ROOT IN MALI

▲ Members of an armed group in the northern town of Kidal, a former rebel stronghold.  
© Souleymane AG Anara/AFP  
via Getty Images

**M**ali was once a darling of the international community and considered a model democracy in a region beset by non-democratic regimes. In 2012, however, mid-ranking military officials carried out a coup in the capital of Bamako, in part due to dissatisfaction with the government's handling of a separatist uprising led by the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), a predominantly ethnic Tuareg rebel group in the country's north. Amid uncertainty in Bamako, the MNLA, in tandem with jihadist gunmen, was able to drive the Malian military from the country's northern territories. The jihadist rebels subsequently turned their guns on the MNLA, taking control of all of northern Mali's major towns and cities.<sup>17</sup>

Even before Mali's descent into chaos, transnational criminal agendas had been gradually entrenching themselves within Malian political and security structures for over a decade. Starting in the early 2000s, criminal networks that first developed around the trafficking of contraband cigarettes and cannabis resin (cultivated in Morocco and transported west to east across the Sahel) began moving large consignments of cocaine through northern Mali.<sup>18</sup> Cocaine shipped from South America, arriving at coastal ports in West Africa, was trafficked overland through northern Mali to North Africa.

The maturation of these networks led to increased competition for control over trafficking routes, with actors involved in narcotics investing their proceeds into other sectors of the formal and informal economy. This ascendant economic power upended traditional hierarchies and altered local political and military balances of power, in turn

creating new patronage networks that penetrated political parties and undermined state institutions. With time, criminal agendas began to embed themselves within state structures.<sup>19</sup>

In 2009, for example, a Boeing 727 registered in Guinea-Bissau took off from Venezuela and landed near the village of Tarkint, in the Gao region, allegedly carrying between seven and eleven tonnes of cocaine. The incident, which came to be known as 'Air Cocaine' garnered international attention, cementing Mali's reputation as a transit state used by drug cartels and confirming the direct involvement of Malian government officials in cocaine trafficking.<sup>20</sup> Not only was the mayor of Tarkint, Baba Ould Cheikh, reportedly involved in the 'Air Cocaine' incident, but he was later referred to by then Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré as 'my bandit', in reference to Ould Cheikh's role as a facilitator in negotiating the release of foreign diplomats kidnapped by the jihadist group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>21</sup>

In the years leading up to the coup in 2012, competition for control of drug trafficking routes led to the development of militarized protection economies, which became intertwined with state security structures.<sup>22</sup> The case of Mohamed Ould Awainat is particularly instructive. Ould Awainat was arrested and imprisoned for his alleged involvement in the 'Air Cocaine' incident, but was released from prison in January 2012, allegedly on condition that he support pro-government militias under the command of Mohamed Abdrahamane Ould Meydou.<sup>23</sup>

The pre-2012 period, when drug trafficking networks were growing in scope in northern Mali, coincided with growing activity by AQIM in the region, giving rise to international fears of an emerging narco-jihadist nexus. These connections between AQIM and drug trafficking, however, were vastly overstated. At that time, AQIM generated most of its revenue by kidnapping foreign citizens for ransom and engaging in various forms of banditry, smuggling and protection rackets.<sup>24</sup> While the collapse of northern Mali and the ouster of Touré in 2012 represented a rupture in the narcotics trafficking system in northern Mali, various local actors associated with drug trafficking were able to form new alliances, including with AQIM splinter groups, to establish new protection and patronage networks in order to continue their criminal activities.<sup>25</sup>



The remains of an aircraft that had been used to transport a large shipment of cocaine from Venezuela to Mali in 2009. © Serge Daniel/AFP via Getty Images



# INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS COLLIDE WITH ENDURING CRIMINAL AGENDAS

▲ Components of a French-led military intervention to drive Islamist rebels from northern Mali in 2013. © Pascal Guyot/ AFP via Getty Images

In January 2013, the French military intervened at the request of the Malian government after the jihadist rebels launched an ambitious advance towards Bamako. The French military mission, *Opération Serval* (which later evolved into *Opération Barkhane*), succeeded in dislodging the coalition of jihadist groups from its northern strongholds. Other African forces provided support as part of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali, which was folded into MINUSMA in 2013.<sup>26</sup> Two other internationally sponsored missions, the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the European-led Task Force Takuba, were initiated in 2017 and 2020, respectively.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that the French aimed to bypass the messy realities of Malian politics by focusing narrowly on jihadist groups with military power, local criminal agendas proved unavoidable. In February 2013, for example, French aircraft bombed an armed convoy that was preparing to capture the strategic smuggling hub of In-Khalil, on the border with Algeria. The official account at the time was that France had carried out the strike to protect elements within the MNLA, the separatist, Tuareg-led rebel group with whom the French were collaborating in the Kidal region to target jihadist groups. Yet subsequent reporting suggested that the convoy heading to In-Khalil was

operating in the service of Arab traders who were seeking to recover millions of euros worth of goods, including drug consignments, that had been confiscated by Tuareg rivals.<sup>28</sup>

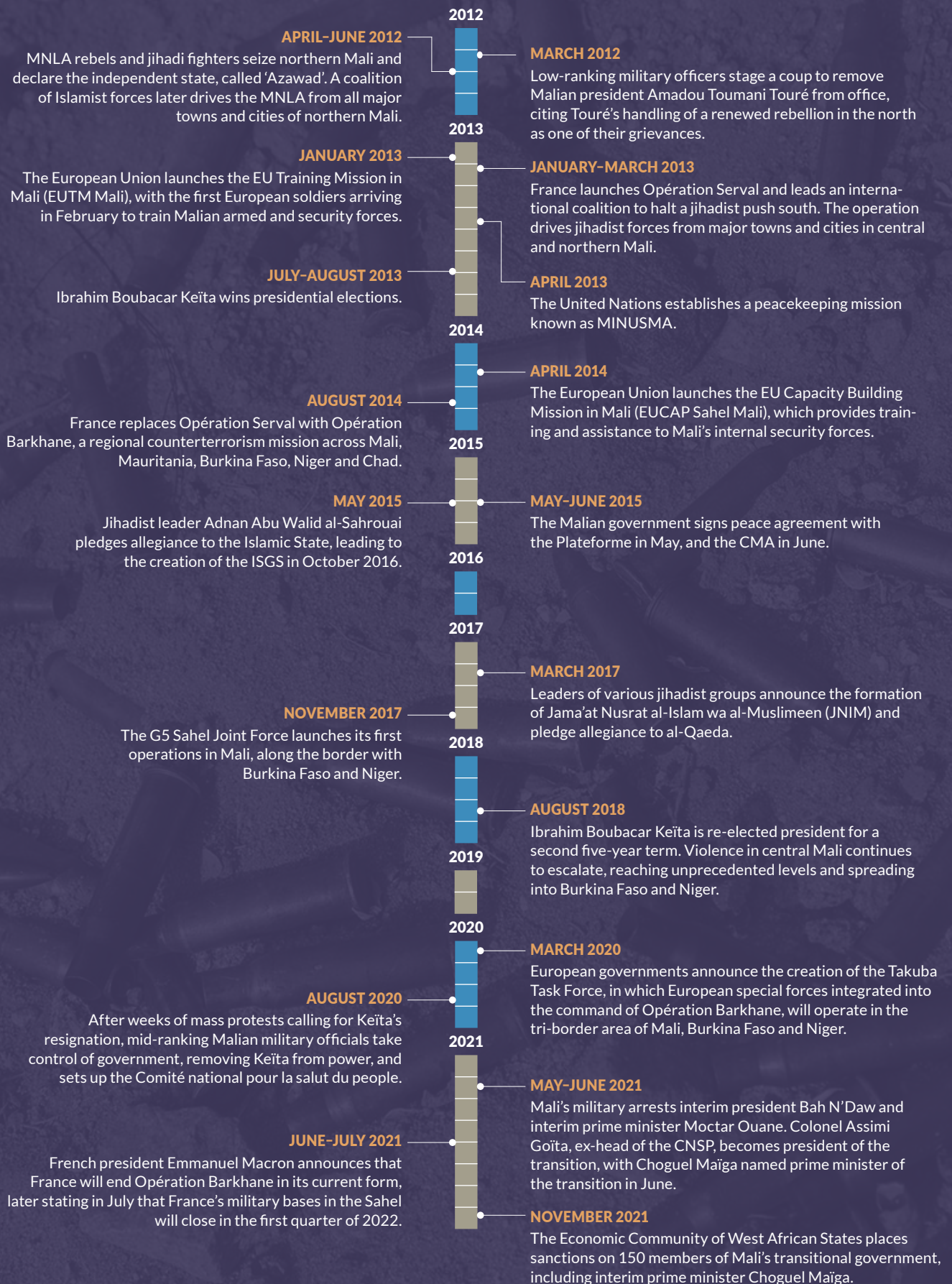
Mali held presidential elections in August 2013, which brought Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to power and paved the way for negotiations between the Malian government and non-jihadist rebel groups. Once again, criminal agendas were a factor in how various actors positioned themselves within this process. The two main groupings that emerged, the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger, known as the 'Plateforme', tracked closely with the alliances that had formed prior to the coup in 2012, within which criminal rivalries had been an important variable. The relevant parties signed a peace agreement in 2015, but after several years of delays and disagreements, the terms of the agreement have barely been implemented.<sup>29</sup>

Even after the signing of the peace agreement, competition over trafficking routes and hubs apparently continued to play a role in how various actors aligned and realigned themselves. Elements within signatory groups regularly clashed over control of trafficking hubs, while local mediation initiatives, referred to as Anéfis I (2015) and Anéfis II (2017), sought to diminish these conflicts by reducing armed competition, theft and banditry in northern Mali. Several figures influential in trafficking were involved in both mediation efforts and although trafficking interests were not the only consideration, they were reportedly a subtext within the negotiations.<sup>30</sup> According to a UN report, rival factions within the peace process, including several involved in trafficking, met once again in Anéfis between 7 and 8 January 2021 to negotiate a compromise over checkpoints and control of key trafficking hubs.<sup>31</sup>

Since 2016, the security situation in Mali has continued to deteriorate and spread to regions outside of northern Mali, enveloping most of central Mali, expanding to southern regions of the country, and spilling over into the neighbouring states of Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>32</sup> In addition to being the epicentre of intercommunal violence, central Mali is now the region where the majority of kidnappings and abductions in the country are carried out by armed actors.<sup>33</sup>

The scale and scope of criminal economies in Mali have subsequently expanded to become part of a new socio-economic context for armed actors, including jihadist groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS). In central Mali, 'self-defence' militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou, which primarily comprises Dogon fighters, have emerged alongside jihadist groups and also appear to have tapped into criminal economies. Local researchers and security experts interviewed by the GI-TOC claim that these militias now run protection rackets around access to certain key roads and markets in central Mali, and engage in arms trafficking in conjunction with members of the Malian military.<sup>34</sup>

## TEN YEARS OF INSTABILITY



## Arms trafficking expands

The arms trafficking market in Mali has expanded since 2016 as armed groups have proliferated throughout the country. In addition to the groups that are signatories to the peace process, other groups now seeking automatic weapons include jihadist groups, militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou, and individuals and communities that previously relied on hunting rifles and artisanal firearms for protection.<sup>35</sup>

The majority of weapons circulating in Mali are primarily from the same stock that has been recycled within the country and its neighbours for decades. Most trafficked weapons either entered Mali after the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 or were looted from Malian stockpiles after the Malian military abandoned large swathes of northern and central Mali in 2012.

This existing stock, which circulates throughout the subregion, has been further replenished by weapons procured by the Malian army, which are either stolen or captured on the battlefield, or sold to armed groups by elements within the Malian military. These looted stocks are a principal source of weapons for jihadist groups on the Burkinafè side of the border, specifically in the Nord and Sahel regions, as well as in the Boucle du Mouhoun and Centre-Nord regions.<sup>36</sup> One international arms expert, for example, remarked that anything given to the Malian military can be expected to end up in the hands of armed groups within a year.<sup>37</sup>

In recent months, there has also been an influx of new weapons from Libya for the first time in several years, with new Chinese variants of AK-47s available for purchase in northern Mali.<sup>38</sup> Within Mali, however, there are multiple arms markets and overlapping networks of actors involved. In the town of Ber, for example, the sizeable arms market is primarily controlled by specific actors from northern Mali's Arab communities, which continue to have fluid associations with armed groups, including the CMA, the Plateforme and JNIM. Ties between these actors and ISGS are less clear.<sup>39</sup> In central Mali, however, the criminal market for weapons is considerably less well defined, with a broad range of state and non-state actors involved.<sup>40</sup>

Mali's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, first agreed to in 2015 but not launched until 2018, has further fuelled demand for weapons on the black market. Multiple researchers and stakeholders in Mali confirmed that individuals sought to 'mobilize' themselves in order to participate in the process, while armed groups sought to swell their ranks so that they could demobilize nominal 'combatants' without meaningfully reducing their military capabilities.<sup>41</sup> The fact that arms trafficking has become a part of the DDR process, and in turn was a factor in driving up weapons prices due to increased demand, further underscores the extent to which criminal agendas can enter into activities that the international community considers technical rather than political.



Chinese-manufactured firearms, such as this variant of the AK-47, are circulating in northern Mali.



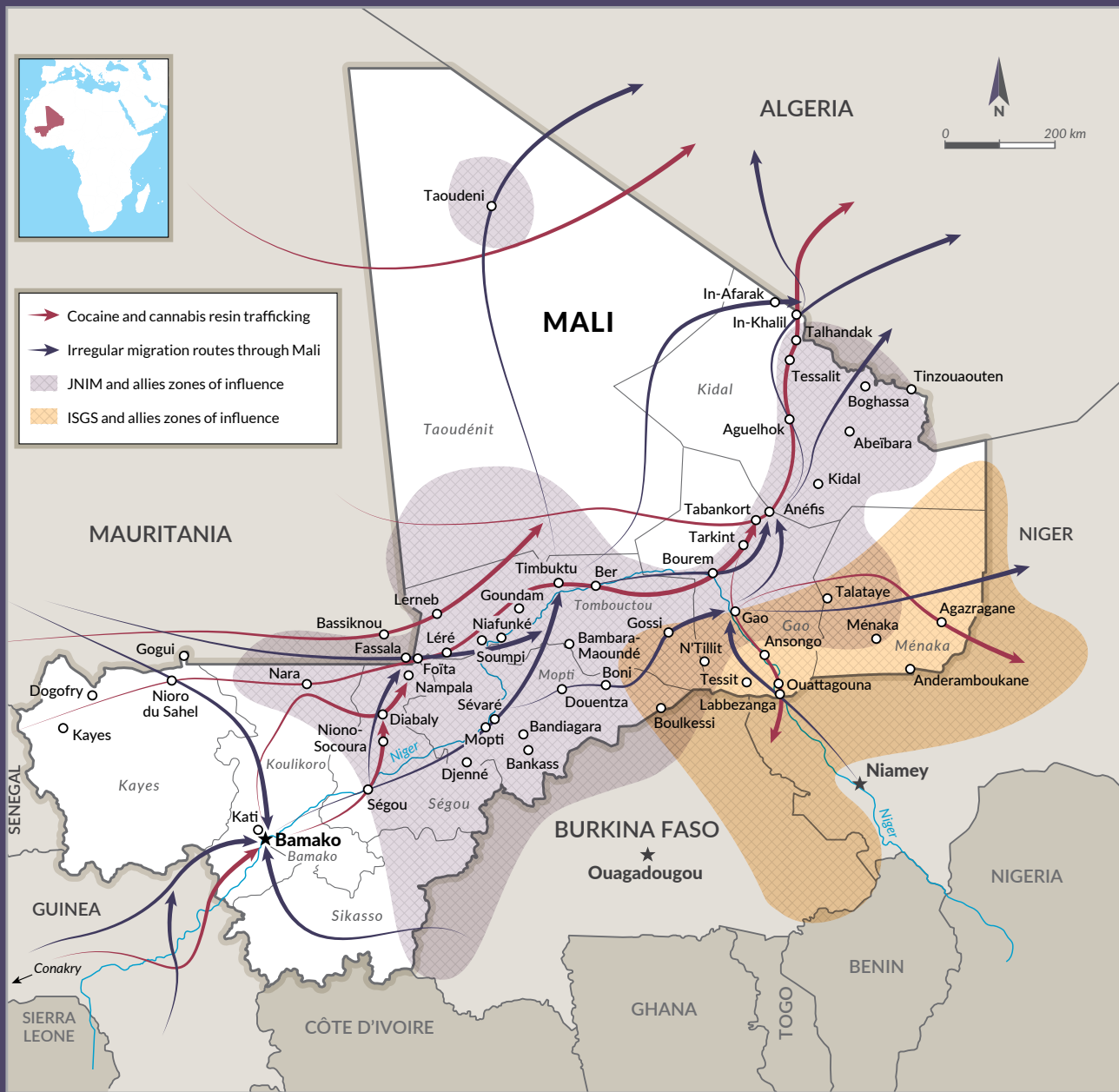
## Grey markets flourish amid CMA and JNIM détente

A boom in artisanal gold mining throughout much of the Sahel since the mid-2010s has provided new revenue streams for armed groups, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. In northern and eastern Burkina Faso, jihadist groups that are also active in Mali have managed to gain control over several gold mining sites, where they can recruit new members and access explosive materials.<sup>42</sup> Jihadist groups have also used protected areas such as national parks and wildlife reserves not only as hideouts, but as a means to ingratiate themselves with the local population by allowing them to use these zones for activities often prohibited by state authorities, including logging, grazing, cotton cultivation and artisanal gold mining.<sup>43</sup>

In northern Mali, several gold mining sites in the Kidal and Gao regions are directly controlled by the CMA, elements within the Plateforme, and JNIM, all of whom tax miners for access to various locations in exchange for security.<sup>44</sup> At certain locations, they require miners to pay for protection, access to water and food, and the right to set up encampments at gold mining sites.<sup>45</sup> Gold mined in the Kidal and Gao regions is transported in multiple directions overland, primarily into Niger, Burkina Faso, and south to Bamako, often for onward export to Dubai.<sup>46</sup>

Here again, the relationship between illicit markets, violent extremism and stability is complex. Robust contraband economies have existed in the region for decades, predicated on the smuggling of subsidized fuel and food products, which are transported irregularly from Algeria into northern Mali.<sup>47</sup> Consumer goods sold in Kidal and much of the Timbuktu and Gao regions, both within the formal and informal economy, enter Mali almost exclusively from Algeria. The Kidal and Gao regions are also transit zones

A miner at an artisanal gold mine in Sadiola, north-western Mali.  
© Amadou Keita/Afrikimages Agency/  
Universal Images Group via Getty  
Images



**FIGURE 2** Routes of cannabis and cocaine trafficking, and irregular migration.

SOURCES: GI-TOC, European Council on Foreign Relations, ACLED

used by traffickers moving high-value narcotics, notably cannabis resin and cocaine, through Mali.<sup>48</sup>

Despite being a zone of poly-criminality where JNIM operates with near impunity, the Kidal region has emerged as an area of relative stability in part due to a détente between the most powerful elements within the CMA and JNIM. In recent months, JNIM has succeeded in disempowering and co-opting members of the CMA, and is the more powerful group throughout much of the region. Some actors who are publicly members of the CMA have close or familial relationships with JNIM. Others are



affiliated with both groups, thus being both signatories to the peace process while also collaborating with jihadist groups. A key component of this ostensible détente between the CMA and JNIM is that armed groups associated with the CMA do not target the jihadist elements and do not collaborate with international forces, and in exchange, jihadist groups do not target the CMA.<sup>49</sup>

The stalled peace process and limited return of Malian state authorities, combined with the October departure of French troops from Kidal and Tessalit, have enabled the CMA and JNIM to achieve new levels of de facto autonomy for the region. This has allowed powerful actors within the CMA who are engaged in transnational organized crime to carry out their activities with relative ease.<sup>50</sup>

The cities of Timbuktu and Gao serve as key hubs of migrant smuggling activity, with thousands of migrants arriving each month and hiring transporters to take them to the Algerian border irregularly. These networks were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and instability along certain key corridors, but have rebounded with the reopening of international borders and the easing of internal restrictions on mobility. Migrants arriving in Timbuktu pay smugglers between 100 000 and 150 000 FCFA (€153–230) to travel along the most popular itinerary to Algeria.<sup>51</sup>

Migrant smuggling networks in Gao, largely dormant since early 2020, are now active, with smugglers charging migrants 20 000 FCFA (€30.49) for overland passage to Algeria. Migrants travelling along this itinerary pay between 10 000 and 20 000 FCFA (€15.24–30.49) at various checkpoints controlled by armed groups before reaching Algeria.<sup>52</sup> In recent months, the political economies of migrant smuggling and transporting of Malian nationals from southern Mali have increasingly become intertwined with the artisanal and small-scale gold mining economies in both the Gao and Kidal regions. Recent reports have also indicated that some migrants transiting through Kidal have been forced to work at various gold mining sites.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, the transportation of migrants coincides with the regular migration patterns of Malian nationals. While some of the actors involved in the transportation of migrants are affiliated with armed groups, there is little indication that armed groups view migrant smuggling as a key source of revenue for their operations. Rather, it is but one activity that takes place within their territories, which becomes a revenue stream as a matter of course.<sup>54</sup>

## **Livestock theft fuels tensions and enables armed group integration**

Livestock theft is a key criminal market that is prevalent throughout much of northern and central Mali, particularly in the regions of Ménaka, Gao and Mopti. Bandits, armed groups and jihadist groups are all active participants, and although it garners relatively little attention in international discourses about organized crime, livestock theft has proven particularly effective in tearing apart the social fabric of communities throughout the Sahel.<sup>55</sup>

Mali's tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Niger, which covers large swathes of central and northern Mali, has become a key zone of conflict and instability, with both



**A Fulani herder. Livestock theft is a criminal activity with direct links to insecurity and violent extremism in Mali.**

© Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images

JNIM and ISGS active in the area. International counterterrorism missions, including Opération Barkhane, Task Force Takuba and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, are particularly focused on this area due to the heavy presence of ISGS, which has been pushed out of other regions by their rivals JNIM. Jihadist groups in this area have proven particularly adept at taking advantage of intercommunal tensions, strategically exacerbating them while also intervening to be providers of 'justice', depending on the context.

Jihadist groups regularly insert themselves into intercommunal violence triggered by livestock theft and competition over resources.<sup>56</sup> Livestock theft is a source of tension between the Fulani and Dawsahak communities, which rely on transhumance for their livelihoods, and sedentary communities such as the Songhai, Bambara and Dogon. It has also been a source of tension within Fulani communities, particularly in areas where 'class' divisions predicated on traditional hierarchies have been exploited by jihadist groups.<sup>57</sup>

Livestock stolen in northern and central Mali, particularly cattle, is sold in markets or to local butchers, but is also transported to neighbouring countries, including Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and, in some cases, as far as Togo, Benin and Nigeria.<sup>58</sup> The surge in cattle rustling has fuelled a local arms race, expanding the pool of actors seeking automatic weapons for personal protection.<sup>59</sup> The escalating militarization of community tensions, which existed before the current crisis in the Sahel, is a key driver of insecurity that has replicated itself throughout much of Mali and Burkina Faso.



## INTEGRATION OF STATE AND CRIMINAL INTERESTS

▲ Cannabis seized near Bamako by the Malian police in 2016.  
© Habibou Kouyate/AFP via Getty Images

**A**lthough there is limited state presence in central and northern Mali, there are still strong indications that criminal interests are deeply embedded within state security structures. One high-level official arrested by the coup leaders in August 2020, for example, was General Moussa Diawara, who led Mali's main intelligence directorate. According to a UN Security Council report, Diawara had allegedly been providing protection and promises of impunity to traffickers from the Tilemsi Arab community in exchange for payments from Mohamed Ould Mataly, a former representative in Mali's national assembly who has long been tied in media reports to drug trafficking via his son-in-law Mohamed Ben Ahmed Mahri.<sup>60</sup>

Widely known by the alias of 'Rougi', Ben Ahmed Mahri is included on the UN Security Council sanctions list for using his drug proceeds to lend 'his support to terrorist armed groups' as well as 'attempting to bribe officials to release arrested combatants and facilitating the fighters to integrate' into the Plateforme.<sup>61</sup>

While this is only one high-profile example, it is indicative of the ways in which government institutions are often implicated in the political and economic processes that facilitate transnational organized crime. High levels of corruption are ubiquitous throughout many major institutions, enabling systemic theft and misallocation of state resources. Bamako must therefore be considered a key hub of organized criminal activity where criminal proceeds from throughout the country are laundered. Here, those engaged in organized crime often invest in legitimate enterprises, including construction projects, real estate investments, nightclubs, car dealerships, travel companies and logistics firms.<sup>62</sup>

*Criminal proceeds  
from throughout  
the country  
are laundered  
in Bamako.*

Growing appreciation for the volume of illicit funds laundered through Mali's formal financial markets is reflected in the actions of the Financial Action Task Force, a watchdog established by the G7 group of advanced economies. In October 2021, the task force placed Mali on its 'grey list', which calls for increased scrutiny of financial dealings in the country.<sup>63</sup>

Bamako also operates as a hub for other illicit flows, a pivotal transit point for the trafficking and export of gold from producing regions throughout the country, and a source and transit point for arms flows in the subregion. Weapons trafficked from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso are transported to Bamako, where they can be stored before being transported elsewhere or sold to local clients. Elements within the Malian military as well as law enforcement have been implicated in arms-trafficking schemes, including selling weapons to armed groups in central Mali, with sales sometimes based on ethnic and community linkages.<sup>64</sup>

Elites based in Bamako are also involved in the sale of illicit cigarettes. These include untaxed cigarettes produced in Europe that are shipped clandestinely into coastal West African states for onward transport to Mali, as well as cigarettes produced in the sub-region that are in turn trafficked into Mali. By law, Imperial Tobacco, through its Bamako-based subsidiary Société Nationale des Tabacs et Allumettes du Mali (SONATAM), has a monopoly on domestic cigarette production and import. Yet, non-SONATAM products are widely available in local markets, and enter Mali primarily from Guinea, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, a recent investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) claimed that British American Tobacco, in partnership with Imperial brands and SONATAM, has oversupplied Mali with 'clean-labelled' cigarettes for years in what appears to amount to 'trade fraud', with the potential consequence of enabling corruption and invigorating smuggling networks in areas under the control of armed groups.<sup>66</sup> A spokesperson for BAT told the OCCRP that it has 'robust policies and procedures in place to fight this issue and fully support regulators, governments and international organizations in seeking to eliminate all forms of illicit trade'.

While geographically and culturally removed from northern Mali, the capital and periphery are far more interlinked than international actors often acknowledge, in part due to the fact that insecurity has rendered much of central and northern Mali inaccessible to non-Malians. Just as elites in Bamako are largely removed from the violence and insecurity in other parts of the country, various members of armed groups that are signatories to the peace process can travel with MINUSMA flights and helicopters, or afford commercial air travel, shuttling back and forth, to and from Bamako. These individuals are therefore able to escape and live apart from the most severe impacts of ongoing instability.

Criminal actors are also able to obtain impunity due to their connections with political elites and military leaders in Bamako and Kati, leveraging their economic power to procure protection and immunity from prosecution.<sup>67</sup> Criminal interests in lucrative markets in the north dictate that, at least for now, the status quo benefits elements of the Bamako elite, making the status quo tolerable, if not lucrative and preferable, for a range of powerful state and non-state actors. In the complex and shifting web of alliances between different armed groups in Mali, at any given time the state may be in opposition to certain jihadist groups while also invested in the criminal economies from which these groups derive revenue. Consequently, much of the criminal activity, violent extremism and insecurity present in the far-flung reaches of the country's periphery is sustained and enabled by protection economies and interests in the capital.



## WHOSE CRIME IS IT ANYWAY?

**M**any international conceptions of organized criminal activity, as well as fledgling toolkits used by the international community, were developed in contexts where the relationship between organized crime and the state is perceived to be adversarial. This logic, however, does not necessarily apply in Mali. Very few actors in Mali are singularly engaged in organized crime, and their ambitions and motivations are heavily shaped by other factors. For the Malian government, the tacit acceptance of certain illicit markets and their linkage to political actors has been a long-standing strategy for maintaining stability through co-option. The last two decades of organized criminal activity in Mali underscore the risk it poses to undermining specific state institutions and the potential for destabilization. However, the wrong types of engagements against organized crime also risk exacerbating instability and state dysfunction.

Accepting these realities and assessing trade-offs may be unsatisfying and even politically fraught for outside actors intervening in Mali. External agendas require tangible, measurable results, and are premised on the understanding that there must be a clear divide between the state and criminal actors.

As outlined above, however, organized crime agendas are not a direct driver of instability in Mali so much as they are ubiquitous across a multitude of political and social processes. Actors involved in formal politics, and criminal actors are not necessarily adversarial and their agendas often overlap and merge. Some actors engaged in organized crime are considered allies of the state, and the economic and social power they derive from criminal activity may be part of what makes them a useful partner in countering other actors deemed adversarial to the state. The aforementioned Ould Mataly, who was placed on the UN sanctions list for his 'involvement in organized crime and

▲ UN Police and a Malian National Guard officer on a joint patrol in the Gao region.  
© MINUSMA/Marco Dormino

*Criminal activities and informal economies targeted as part of stabilization efforts may be a reflection of priorities shaped by external actors as much as they are the product of a nuanced, informed analysis of realities on the ground.*

association with terrorist armed groups' in July 2019 was listed as a special advisor to one of the cabinet members of Mali's transitional government as recently as March 2021. He is also a regular participant in local peace processes.

While the UN Panel of Experts has done important work in identifying the ways in which various actors long rumoured to be associated with organized crime are undermining the peace process, their work further lays bare the extent to which criminal agendas are deeply entangled with both state and non-state politico-military groups. The fact that many of the actors named by the UN Panel of Experts are still actively engaged in formal politics, either via connections to Bamako or through their affiliations with signatory groups in the peace process, also highlights the extent to which they represent potential spoilers.

Additionally, many criminal economies in Mali, most of which would be more plainly described as informal economies, are not inherently destabilizing. These activities are thoroughly enmeshed not only within the formal economies, but also within formal and informal political and security structures. As a result, contraband economies in Mali, particularly those predicated on mobility and the smuggling of goods across borders, cannot easily be isolated or analyzed apart from the formal and informal politics and security dynamics of the region.<sup>68</sup>

These realities are particularly salient amid calls for increased border security and efforts to limit mobility under the guise of combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling. While both MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel Joint Force emphasize the need to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking, there is no compelling evidence at this time that migrant smuggling or its proceeds contribute to instability in Mali, or that armed groups compete for control over migrant smuggling or human trafficking routes.<sup>69</sup> The inclusion of migrant smuggling and human trafficking in these mandates is arguably more a reflection of the priorities of European donors, who have made border securitization and surveillance a key pillar of their engagement with the African continent in hopes of reducing irregular migration to Europe. Put differently, the types of criminal activity and informal economies that are being targeted as part of stabilization efforts may be a reflection of priorities shaped by external actors as much as they are the product of a nuanced, informed analysis of realities on the ground.

Furthermore, 'crime-terror' framings of organized crime risk mischaracterizing the phenomenon as a technical issue to be solved primarily through building the capacity of the state. This framing in turn over-privileges law enforcement and rule of law approaches deployed by the central state when in fact it is local communities and constituents themselves who may be best equipped to come up with solutions that mitigate the negative impacts of criminal activity. Additionally, oversimplifying organized crime through unnuanced linkages to violent extremism solicits counterterrorism responses that may be inappropriate and potentially counterproductive.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

▲ UN Police on patrol in the Ménaka region. © MINUSMA/  
Gema Cortes

In central and northern Mali, the state has little formal presence and is viewed by local populations as an ineffectual provider of security, if not a predatory actor that drives instability. Consequently, communities have made arrangements – often under coercive circumstances – with local politico-military actors, including jihadist groups, to allow for a modicum of security in daily life. The interests and well-being of these communities are therefore predicated on navigating the competing and overlapping agendas of state and non-state actors. International military and political missions must consider how such communities will view any campaign that supports ‘the return of the state’ to areas outside its control, and what such a ‘return’ will mean for them. At any given time, their motives and participation in criminal activity may be driven purely by profit, or to generate funds in the service of social and political objectives, or just to cope with rapidly changing dynamics on the ground.<sup>70</sup>

These complexities further highlight the extent to which a nuanced understanding of the nature of criminal activity and illicit economies in Mali is not only important for international partners who view organized crime as part of their agenda, but also for those who might believe more ‘technical’ approaches can exist apart from these dynamics. This includes actors intervening in the development and humanitarian space, who may not have experience incorporating these factors into their programming.

Livestock theft, for example, is a form of criminal activity with direct links to insecurity and violent extremism, yet it receives little attention from the international community. This oversight most likely stems from the fact that the crime falls outside the traditional conceptions of transnational organized crime, which tend to focus on illicit



Newspapers cover the announcement of the end of France's military operation in Mali, June 2021.

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markets like drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human smuggling and trafficking. While it might not be clear what role, if any, external actors can play in disrupting livestock theft in central and northern Mali, the international community would do well to better understand how this criminal activity is destabilizing communities and spreading insecurity into northern Burkina Faso, south-western Niger and, with greater frequency, into southern Mali and southern Burkina Faso.

If the goal is indeed to create the conditions for a stabilized Mali, the international community should be careful to avoid idealistic, state-centric frameworks that are often driven by foreign priorities, especially in cases where local communities have made arrangements with criminal and jihadist actors to ensure their own security. This does not mean that MINUSMA or the G5 Sahel Joint Force – and other actors operating in Mali – should not consider organized crime within their mandates or missions. Rather, it requires diligence in understanding the political, economic and security contexts of the region to ensure that interventions do not do more harm than good.

Going forward, international actors would do well to:

- Ensure that mandates and programming that engage organized crime and criminal markets are centred on the ways organized crime and illicit markets harm Malians and are linked to conflict and destabilization, rather than driven by external priorities (such as cracking down on migrant smuggling).



- Support and reinforce efforts, such as those of the UN Panel of Experts, to identify and apply targeted sanctions to specific actors engaged in organized crime in ways that undermine the peace process or contribute to conflict within Mali.
- Shift away from militarized and law-enforcement approaches to organized crime and towards more development-oriented solutions that will enable communities to mitigate the negative impact of criminal agendas. A posture that focuses on development will offer more space for international partners and local communities to properly sequence the policy responses to organized criminal activities (harm reduction, interdiction, eradication, prohibition, or decriminalization, etc).
- Recognize that distinct illicit markets have different relationships to instability, and craft stabilization responses accordingly. In order to do so:
  - Distinguish which economies are labour-intensive, a source of livelihoods, and perceived as legitimate by local communities (such as artisanal gold mining or transport and trade of contraband), as opposed to those that solely empower criminal actors (such as drug trafficking, arms trafficking or protection rackets). The former will predominantly require development rather than military or law enforcement responses.
  - Pinpoint and prioritize the types of organized criminal activity and actors that are the most destabilizing, while recognizing that international intervention may have no role to play in certain economies. Livestock theft (which creates inter-communal tensions that can spark jihadist exploitation) and kidnapping for ransom (which harms community members and provides a key source of financing to armed groups) are two criminal markets repeatedly highlighted as particularly destabilizing by stakeholders in Mali.
- Incorporate organized crime assessments into early-warning stabilization operations. When identifying priority geographies for preventative stabilization programming, include escalating cattle theft as an indicator of growing tensions and instability, and encourage stakeholder responses to this phenomenon.
- Conduct and regularly update conflict and network analyses that focus on informal and criminal economies, rather than a singular focus on violent extremism. This will aid in understanding the actors involved in illicit markets and their evolving and/or overlapping relationships with the state, non-state political authorities, armed groups and violent extremist groups.
- Ensure that future mandates and programming directly solicit, and are explicitly designed to address, the needs of local communities by allowing them to take the lead on developing responses to organized crime and criminal markets.

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